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A Japanese Perspective of the Community Building in East Asia

By ITO Kenichi

It is my honor to be able to speak in this dinner meeting before the distinguished participants of the 2nd Annual Conference of the Network of East Asian Think-Tanks (NEAT). Taking advantage of this honorable occasion, I would like to address myself to you on the topic of “A Japanese Perspective of the Community Building in East Asia.”

It is true that until recently we, Japanese, tended to be more passive, if not indifferent, to the concept of an East Asian community. Of course, it didn't mean that we, Japanese, failed to understand the importance of the regional cooperation in East Asia. On the contrary, Japan has always been one of the major promoters of the regional cooperation in East Asia. Suffice it to say that Japan was one of the countries that played a leading role in tackling with the 1997 financial crisis in East Asia, as demonstrated by her contribution to the successful role played by the Chian Mai Initiative in the resolution of the crisis. But still, we, Japanese, must be said to have been behind the move advocating community building in the region. This passiveness of Japan's attitude toward the concept of an East Asian community until the recent past might have been explained partly by her reluctance to take an initiative in anything that might be associated with the memory of “The Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere” which was advocated by Japan during the Second World War.

Having said that, however, I can say that such was the case only until yesterday. Today, joining with you in the 2nd Conference of NEAT, we are more determined to go along with you in the direction of the creation of an East Asian community. In what were called “Issue Papers,” which were presented by the Government of Japan to the ASEAN+3 Foreign Ministers Meeting held in Jakarta last month, it was stated that community building had now emerged as a shared future goal in East Asia. What has brought about the change of our attitude? Or, better to say, what has enlightened us? In my personal case, it was my experience to attend the 1st NEAT Conference held in Beijing last September. I saw there for the first time in my life Asians coming from different countries speaking in one voice and working for one purpose. I was touched by the aspiration of the people assembled in that NEAT conference.

After returning home from Beijing, we, those who attended the conference, called on our countrymen to organize an all-Japan intellectual platform where we can deepen our understanding of the concept of an East Asian community by way of conducting research and

promoting policy debates among ourselves. Thus, “The Council on East Asian Community (CEAC)” was inaugurated in Tokyo on May 18 this year. As of today, the membership of CEAC consists of representatives of 12 public policy think tanks and 15 business corporations in addition to 50 individuals who are mostly scholars but also include some journalists and politicians. In response to our call, 9 government ministries such as Foreign Ministry, Finance Ministry, Trade and Industry Ministry, Education and Science Ministry etc. also joined the activities of CEAC in their advisory capacity of Counselors. Actually, all the members of the current Japanese delegation to this 2nd Conference of NEAT are members of CEAC. One of the first topics which we discussed among ourselves was whether an East Asian community was really necessary and feasible. I am happy to report to you that the arguments we had were very positive and constructive.

Based on the results of such arguments within CEAC, but not in the name of CEAC as CEAC will not be ready to announce its unified view until any time soon yet, I would like to present to you today rather my personal view on the topic of “A Japanese Perspective of the Community Building in East Asia.” After the end of the Cold War the trend of regionalism spread all over the world hand in hand with another trend of globalization. However, it was conspicuous until the recent past that two regions in the world were devoid of such regionalism. One was Middle East and another was East Asia. Whereas it was understandable that Middle East failed to have its regionalism because of the political, economic and cultural consequences of Arab-Israel confrontation, the absence of regionalism in East Asia was never as much justifiable as in the case of Middle East. Certainly, it was true that this part of the world has been long characterized by the unique diversity in levels of economic development, traditional values, culture, ethnicity, religion, language, political regimes, etc. During the Cold War era political and ideological barriers hindered closer regional cooperation. But these excuses had to give way to the more powerful forces of integration which had brought about a gigantic change in the region, i.e. a drastic expansion of intra-regional exchanges and interdependence, particularly after the end of the Cold War. Today’s East Asia is a center of vast economic potential and dynamism. Now, a third of the world population resides in this region. Its share of the global GDP accounts for one fifth, and countries in the region now hold about a half of the world foreign reserves. The 1997 financial crisis in East Asia awakened people of the region to the need of a regional approach to secure their prosperity. It is said that a friend in need is a friend indeed. Thanks to the crisis, we realized that our friends indeed were nobody but our neighbors in the region.

Let me now proceed to the question of how to build a regional community in East Asia. When I think about the history of regional integration in East Asia, I cannot help admiring the efforts made by ASEAN nations. In East Asia where many handicaps exist for regional integration, ASEAN has always played a leading role. It has hosted a number of key forums of regional cooperation, including ASEAN+1s, ASEAN+3, PMC and ARF. These forums have nurtured the basis of community building in East Asia. It is known to us all that the NEAT conference itself for which we meet here this evening was made possible under the framework designed by

the ASEAN+3. In contrast to the European Union, where rule-making and institutionalization has been a driving force for integration, in East Asia the idea of community building was originally inspired by the progress of various functional cooperation. To list just a few of them, we can mention Economic Partnership Agreements, Chiang Mai Initiative, Asian Bond Market Initiative, Asia Broadband Initiative, Mekong Region Development, and many other cooperation in the fields of terrorism, illicit drug trafficking, sea piracy, non-proliferation, energy security, environmental protection, food security, health, intellectual property, etc. I must say that this approach to the community building was better fit to the reality of East Asia as diversity was more salient here than in other regions. I am of the opinion that the functional approach is a natural choice for community building in East Asia.

Having said that, however, I have to hurriedly add that community building cannot be achieved by the mere promotion of the functional cooperation alone. If left alone at the mercy of either market forces or arbitrary diplomatic bargaining, it can drift and lose sense of direction. Here I would like to call your attention to the importance of the creation of a “sense of community” or a “shared identity as an East Asian.” A European friend of mine once told me that he was then a German but that he would become a European once European integration had been achieved. He further added that then his German identity would not matter for him anymore. We, East Asians, are still at the stage of talking about “economic integration,” or at best “economic community.” Through the strengthening of our functional cooperation, we may be soon able to talk about “energy community,” “environmental community” and many other types of “community” in the not so distant future. Here, however, we must be reminded that we need a beacon that guides us in the direction toward community building. Simple proliferation of functional cooperation alone is sure to lead us nowhere. Of course, it is true that the functional cooperation facilitates the so-called “enmeshment process,” which is indispensable for forging a “sense of community” in East Asia. But “enmeshment process” as such alone again fails to provide us with a beacon that is to guide us in our direction toward community building. Some other people argue that to narrow the developmental gaps among countries in the region is the most important means for achieving a “shared identity as an East Asian.” I agree with them. But let me add that narrowing the developmental gaps is one of the means to achieve an objective of a “shared identity”. By nature, it fails to be a beacon that guides us to the objective of “shared identity.” What then can be the beacon that can give us a sense of direction toward our goal of “community building”? What will take us in the direction toward the objective of a “sense of community” and a “shared identity as an East Asian”? In Europe it was their conviction that they will never turn Europe into a battlefield again that played the role of such a beacon in their process of integration.

We need something more powerful than a “common interest”. Something beyond a “common interest” is needed. That is a “common value” to be shared by everybody in the region. It is my strong conviction that a “sense of respect” for each other and a “principle of equality” among each other are prerequisite for any meaningful “community building” in the region. This must be very clear to anybody if he or she is reminded that the opposite “sense” and “principle” are a

“sense of superiority” and a “principle of domination.” Every nation, rich or poor, must be respected. No nation, big or small, is allowed to dominate. On the basis of this “sense of respect” and this “principle of equality,” we can and should build confidence among ourselves. Our region must become a region where each of us can be confident that our neighbors will never resort to the threat or use of force as a means to settle international disputes. This is what is stipulated in Article 2, Section 4 of the Charter of the United Nations. Japan has its own Article 9 of the Constitution stating, “Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes.” But, to tell the truth, what really matters is not a legal framework but a state of affairs as having been achieved. Look at, for instance, Europe, where community building has reached its highest level of development. Along the borders dividing any member countries of the European Union, we see no tanks, missiles, fortresses directed against each other. For many reasons other than legal, i.e. political, economic and other, the member countries of the European Union have come to a stage where it can be called a “no-war community.” Let me now conclude my speech. We need a “common value” that goes beyond a “common interest”. Starting from the “sense of respect” and the “principle of equality” among ourselves, we can and should build confidence among ourselves. The confidence that our neighbors will never resort to the threat or use of force as a means to settle international disputes would take us to the higher level of “community building.” Here, what really matters is not a legal framework but a state of affairs as having been achieved. Our “community building” can start from “economic community,” and add “energy community,” “environmental community,” etc. But it must, before reaching the final stage of an “East Asian Community,” accomplish “no-war community” in the region.

(This is the text of a speech delivered by Prof. ITO Kenichi, President & CEO of The Japan Forum on International Relations (JFIR), at the 2nd Network of East Asian Think-tanks (NEAT) Conference in Bangkok, Thailand on August 16, 2004.)